An-Najah Univ. J. Res. (H. Sc.), Vol. 19(1), 2005

The Collapse of Grammatical Rules under the Pressure of Semantic Content: Subject-Verb Concord

تأثير المعنـى في كسر القواعد النحوية : مطابقة الفعل والفاعل

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Accepted: (9/7/2003), Received: (15/6/2004)

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is twofold: (i) to examine the extent to which English native speakers' abide by the grammar rule of concord that the verb must agree with its subject in number, and (ii) to highlight the implications of the obtained results for EFL teaching/learning process. For this purpose, a test consisting of 23 concord items was devised and presented orally and in writing to two different groups of English native speakers. The results showed that the majority of native speakers do not actually follow the formal rule of concord and resort to other kinds of concord under the pressure of semantic content. These findings have pedagogical implications for EFL teaching/learning process. EFL teachers, when teaching grammar, should take into consideration not only what traditional grammars say but also what native speakers actually say.

ملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد مدى التزام ناطقي اللغة الإنجليزية الأصليين شفوياً وكتابياً بالقاعدة الإنجليزية التقليدية التي تنص على وجوب مطابقة الفعل والفاعل في العدد. كما تهدف إلى تقييم مضاعفات هذا الالتزام أو عدمه على طبيعة اللغة نفسها وعلى تعلم هذه اللغة وتعليمها لغة أجنبية. وقد تكونت عينة الدراسة من ثلاثين طالباً إنجليزيا اختيروا بالطريقة العشوائية، وأعد لهذا الغرض اختبار بسيط يتألف من ثلاثة وعشرين سؤالاً ثم قدم للطلاب بطريقتين: الأولى شفوية والثانية كتابية. وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن معظم الناطقين الأصليين باللغة الإنجليزية لا يطابقون الفعل والفاعل في العدد في أحيان كثيرة (حسب القاعدة الإنجليزية التقليدية)، وإنما يعتمدون كثيراً على معنى الفاعل، وكان ذلك بارزاً في الاختبار الشفوي أكثر منه في الاختبار الكتابي. وبناءً على ذلك خلصت الدراسة إلى أن هناك اتجاهاً قوياً عند الناطقين الأصليين باللغة الإنجليزية (وربما غيرها من اللغات) إلى كسر القوانين والقواعد التقليدية التي وصفها علماء اللغة تحت تأثير المعنى

والاستخدام اليومي، كما خلصت الدراسة إلى أنه ما دام معظم أصحاب اللغة الأصليين لا يلتزمون بالقواعد الموصوفة تقليدياً في كتب القواعد فإنه يجدر بمدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية أن يكونوا على دراية بهذه التطورات، وأن يأخذوها بعين الاعتبار في أثناء تدريسهم هذه اللغة لغة أجنبية.

I. Introduction:

"In fact, researchers are finding, the most effective communicators are those who frequently bend the rules".

***Levy (in press)*:**

In the past, grammarians took a prescriptive approach rather than a descriptive one; they used to instruct speakers and readers in how to use language rather than describing what most native speakers do. However, in recent years there has been a shift in emphasis from how languages should be used to how they are actually used.

Accordingly, several recent grammar monographs may offer a more descriptive treatment of some problematic topics such as subject-verb concord in comparison with earlier grammars. Nevertheless, at least to the best of my knowledge, this treatment is not purely descriptive or conclusive. For example, they all provide the reader with the prescriptive ‘rule’ of number concord which basically states that a singular subject requires a singular verb form; a plural subject requires a plural verb form. But only few of these books(1) offer concrete theoretical or practical considerations concerning other widely used types of concord such as notional or proximity(2)

This gap has given rise to some controversy. For example, while Quirk et al (1972: 367) hold that structural concord, with few exceptions,

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(1) Juul (1975), to my knowledge, is the only grammar that contains theoretical considerations on the notion of concord but without any reference to any practical usage. Some other books such as Quirk et al (1972), Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983), Crews (1980), and Quirk et al (1985) offer a partial treatment of some practical usage of concord. But perhaps Biber et al (1999) represents the most up-to-date descriptive analysis of the English grammar in both spoken and written language.

(2) According to Taylor (in press), this kind of concord applies when the proximity of the nearest conjoined subject overrides the number of the head noun.

agrees with notional concord, Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983: 44) believe that the existence of these two types of concord is a major cause of potential conflict in subject-verb agreement. Furthermore, Pulgram (1978: 93) points out that grammarians have adopted a more flexible attitude towards subject-verb concord, as a result of the apparent breakdown of formal grammatical rules under the influence of semantic content. Taylor (in press) has even gone further to say that "English users become less sensitive to traditional grammatical constraints. This could lead to an eventual loss of the singular/plural distinction in verbs in English".

On the assumption that our readers already know about the traditional theoretical treatments of subject-verb concord, this paper will be largely devoted to comparing the performance and preferences of two groups of native speakers on the same oral and written material in the light of traditional prescriptive rules. Nowadays, it is widely-accepted that speaking is different from writing. In this respect, Miller and Weinert (1998: 4– 5) say:

> ‘The terms ‘spoken language’ and ‘written language’ do not refer merely to different mediums but relate to partially different systems of morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and the organisation of texts. These facts are crucial for investigations of language but are generally ignored in theoretical syntax once the initial declaration about the priority of spoken language has been made’.

Of course, if the data shows great variations in this regard, we will have to consider, though briefly, the practical consequences of such variations to the EFL teaching-cum-learning process. Despite the growing interest in the way EFL teachers are trained, the question of whether they should focus on what native speakers actually say rather than what grammarians say has not, to the best of my knowledge, been part of EFL courses whether at school level or university level, at least in this part of the world.

More specifically, this study will address these two questions:

1. To what extent do native speakers follow the traditional grammar rules of concord?

2. What are the implications of such results for EFL teachers and learners?

Apart from this brief introduction, this paper will be presented further in four sections. Section two outlines the general research methodology and gives the rationale behind this methodology. Section three presents the elicited performance of native speakers in speech and writing as compared with traditional rules. Section four flags up the pedagogical implications to the EFL teaching-cum-learning process. Section five gives a brief summary of the conclusions drawn from our empirical work.

II. Method:

Subjects: Thirty native speakers of English were invited to do a very simple test. Since all subjects had to be linguistically naïve, our informants were first year students from the Department of History at the University of Reading in 2001. As an incentive, subjects were offered photocopy cards.

Test Material and Procedure: A test of 23 items was devised. Each item was designed or chosen from published sources to elicit native speakers' performance on a specific structural or notional point of subject-verb concord (see Appendix 1). The same test was administered in two ways: in the first way both the stimulus utterance and the response were oral, and in the second way the stimulus sentence and the response were written. The test was designed to examine the performance of the first group (15 native speakers) on the usage of concord in 23 spoken utterances as compared with the performance of another group of 15 native speakers on the same material as written statements. Subjects were instructed to base their responses solely on their immediate reactions, without having to worry too much about any rules they might have learnt about so-called 'correct' English. Subjects needed approximately ten minutes to do the test.

III. Traditional Rules and Native Speakers' Performance[3]:

In this section, I shall try to offer a brief review of what some prescriptive grammarians say concerning particular points of subject-verb agreement. Then I shall examine the performance of the 15 native speakers on the usage of concord in 23 spoken utterances as compared with the performance of the other 15 native speakers on the same material as written statements (Appendix 2). The percentages supplied under each sentence indicate the proportion of native speakers that chose each verb form as the only possible answer [ ], or the preferred answer ( ), or all acceptable answers < > in both the oral (O) and the written (W) items. The number after each sentence represents its position in appendices 1 & 2. Our 23 items can be discussed according to 13 grammatical or notional points. These points can be summarised as follows:

A. Coordinate Phrases Used as Names:

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 176), "plural words and phrases (including coordinate phrases) count as singular if they are used as names, titles, quotations, etc". In the same vein, Stott & Chapman (2001: 161) maintain that "sometimes … the meaning of a subject can override its number". Of course, this contradicts the grammatical principle which states that when there are two nouns joined by 'and', the verbal must be plural (Leech & Svartvik, 2002: 275). In order to evaluate what native speakers actually do in this regard, let us examine their oral and written performance in sentences (1) & (2) whose subjects have coordinate phrases but notionally express 'single units'.

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(3) The striking characteristic that has been exposed whilst carrying out my survey of 30 native speakers' opinions about their usage of certain verb forms in certain utterances is that most of them appeared to be puzzled. Some of their spontaneous responses, for example, were: 'I have never tried to think of such a thing!'; 'This is interesting to think about!'; 'I don't like to follow grammatical rules!; 'My English is not really English!' …etc. This emphasises the idea that native speakers know their language very well, but they are not necessarily aware of what it is that they know. They might have never paused to question why they use certain verb forms in certain utterances unless they are asked to explain this form to someone else.

1. *Crime and Punishment* is / are perhaps the best-constructed of Dostoyevsky's novels (ibid).
2. Bread and water has / have traditionally been considered the standard meal in prison.

Table (1): Native Speakers' Performance on Items 1 & 2

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
1	O	[63%] + (7%) = 70%	(7%)	<23%>
	W	[100%]	0%	0%
2	O	[31%]	[16%] + (7%) = 23%	<46%>
	W	[60%]	(7%)	<33%>

As table (1) shows, in both sentences native speakers appear to be more flexible in speech than in writing. But their performance was apparently different in (2) from (1) although both of them follow the same notional and grammatical concord. This seems to suggest that native speakers are not necessarily conscious or do not follow any systematic criterion while speaking or writing. But the striking result is that notional concord won the 'battle' against grammatical concord in our first example.

B. Collective Nouns:

According to Quirk et al (1972: 360), collective nouns are "notionally plural but grammatically singular." However, this principle is flexible in cases like sentences (3) and (4) below. For example, 'audience' in (3) refers to a single whole body, and requires a singular verb, but 'audience' in (4) refers to a gathering of individuals and requires a plural verb.

3. The audience was / were enormous.
4. The audience was/were enjoying every minute of it. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973:177)

Table (2): Native Speakers' Performance on Items (3) and (4)

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
3	O	[84%] + (16%) = 100%	0%	0%
	W	[80%]	(13%)	<7%>
4	O	[10%]	[45%] + (15%) = 60%	<30%>
	W	[23%]	[43%] + (7%) = 50%	<27%>

The data presented in table (2) supports Quirk's argument above which asserts that the majority of native speakers tend to treat 'audience' in cases like (3) above as undivided body (singular), and to treat the same noun when used in cases like (4) above as plural entity. Again this indicates that the semantic content of the subject directs the native speakers' usage of number concord.

C. Subject Clauses:

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:177), the subject in sentences like (5) below is treated as "an implied reduction of two clauses" (What I say is … and what I think is …), and so it takes a plural verbal.

5. What I say and what I think is / are my own affair. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973:177)

Table (3): Native Speakers' Performance on Item (5)

Item		**Singular**	**Plural**	**All acceptable answers**
5	O	[30%] + (15%) = 45%	[25%] + (15%) = 40%	<15%>
	W	[53%]	[27%]	<20%>

But as table (3) indicates, native speakers' opinions were divided over the above example and they did not follow Quirk and Greenbaum's suggested principle above. In fact, the majority felt that the singular is the only possible or preferred option. My own interpretation of this is that they might have viewed their 'speech' (in item 5 above) as a product of their thinking and so they treated both as 'one process or one unit'. This again seems to suggest that native speakers basically consider the deep meaning of the subject rather than its grammatical form.

But it should be noted that the results might be different if we used 'affairs' instead of the singular form 'affair' in the postverbal (NP2), which according to Jacbosson (1990) is the real subject.

D. Equative Sentences:

According to Jacobsson (1990), the postverbal NP2 is the real subject in equative sentences. Therefore, in cases like (6) below the verbal follows 'revolutions' (NP2). However, Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:176)

state that a clause which functions as a subject should be treated as singular regardless of what follows in NP2.

6. What they want is / are revolutions everywhere.

Table (4): Native Speakers' Performance on Item (6)

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
6	O	[7%]	[46%] + (7%) = 53%	<40%>
	W	[7%] + (7%) = 14%	[46%] + (20%) = 66%	<20%>

As shown in table 4, the results obtained for both oral and written cases support Jacobsson's previous analysis which obviously has a semantic implication. That is to say, Jacobsson's analysis appears to reflect the native speakers' usage more than traditional rules. The order of this sentence, according to Jacobsson's argument, can be reversed to be '*Revolutions are what they want everywhere*'.

E. Antecedent of What:

According to Juul (1975), the antecedent of 'what' in cases like (7) below determines the verb form. Therefore, since the antecedent of 'what' in the following sentence denotes a plurality, a plural verbal is recommended.

7. I went to the market to buy vegetables, but what I found was/were stale.

Table (5): Native Speakers' Performance on Item (7)

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
7	O	[23%]	[27%] + (27%) = 4%	<23%>
	W	[27%]	[53%] + (7%) = 60%	<13%>

The results for the above example in writing and speaking generally support Juul's previous idea of using the plural in such cases; 60% of the native speakers chose the plural as their only possible or their preferred answer. However, a considerable number of them chose the singular as the only option. This also emphasises the importance of the 'semantic reference' which the clause 'what I found' implies for the plural noun 'vegetables'.

F. Either … Or Phrases:

According to Quirk et al (1972: 363), two singular subject phrases and two plural subject phrases coordinated with ‘either … or’ take a singular and a plural verb respectively. In cases like sentences (8) & (9) where one phrase is singular and the other is plural or vice versa, Quirk et al (1985: 240) suggest the principle of proximity as a solution (i.e. the verb follows the nearest conjoined subject)[4]. However, Greenbaum (1996: 240) maintains that the verb is generally plural.

8. Either my friends or my brother is / are going to do it.
9. Either my sister or my brothers is / are going to do it.

Table (6): Native Speakers’ Performance on Items (8) and (9)

Item		**Singular**	**Plural**	**All acceptable answers**
8	O	[17%]	[69%] + (14%) = 83%	0%
	W	[20%]	[55%]	<25%>
9	O	[100%]	0%	0%
	W	[7%]	[70%]	<23%>

The above percentages indicate that native speakers are uncertain about the rules of concord as they do not seem to follow any particular rule in their treatment of examples (8) and (9) above. In example 8, they preferred the plural to the singular for the correlatives (either … or) in both their writing and speaking although the closely preceding noun is singular. But in example 9, they generally preferred the singular in their speaking and the plural in their writing when the closely preceding noun is plural. Clearly, such results contradict Quirk et al's suggestion above that this matter can be simply resolved by the principle of proximity.

G. Singular Expressions:

According to Close (1978), expressions like *none, everyone, someone, anyone, no one, neither,* etc. are considered singular for

(4) Van Shaik (1976) and Farhady (1977) [both cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983] also found out that native speakers do not consistently follow the principle of proximity in these cases, but they pointed out that native speakers’ responses supported this more strongly for ‘either…or’ than they did for ‘neither…nor’

purposes of concord when they act as subjects of a clause, and so their verbs must be singular as in (10, 11, 12, 13, and 14) below. However, if we apply the principle of proximity (Quirk et al, 1972: 365), these expressions are ignored and the verb agrees with the noun which closely precedes it.

10. No one except his own supporters agrees/agree with him. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973:177)
11. None of the pens is / are on the table.
12. Neither John nor the twins was / were at the party.
13. Neither the twins nor John was / were at the party.
14. Neither of these cars is / are exactly what I want.

Table (7): Native Speakers' Performance on Items (10), (11), (12), (13) and (14).

Item		**Singular**	**Plural**	**All acceptable answers**
10	O	[7%]	[46%] + (24%) = 70%	<23%>
	W	0%	[69%]+ (31%) = 100%	0%
11	O	(7%)	[76%] + (17%)	0%
	W	[14%]	[86%]	0%
12	O	0%	[69%] + (14%) = 83%	<17%>
	W	[14%]	[73%] + (13%) = 86%	0%
13	O	0%	[46%] + (30%) = 76%	<24%>
	W	[27%]	[46%] + (27%) = 73%	0%
14	O	0%	[53%] + (17%) = 70%	<30%>
	W	[27%]	[60%]	<13%>

The reasonably similar results obtained for the above five sentences strongly support Quirk et al's (1972: 365) recommendation of using the principle of proximity as a solution in such cases. The majority of native speakers in our study adopted this principle in the oral and written examples.; some 20% - 30% considered the singlular and the plural as acceptable answers; a few followed the traditional grammatical rule and chose the sigular as the only option.

Furthermore, although grammatical concord insists that *none* is always singular regardless of what follows in a prepositional phrase,

Quirk & Greenbaum (1973:179) claim that notional concord appeals for a plural verb if the antecedent of *none* denotes a plurality. Let us consider the results obtained for the following example:

15. I have ordered the rose bushes, but none has / have yet arrived.

Table (8): Native Speakers' Performance on Item (15).

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
15	O	0%	[84%]+ (16%) = 100%	0%
	W	[27%]	[73%]	0%

As shown in table 8 above, Native speakers' performance in this sentence shows that they tend to follow notional concord with regard to 'none' even in writing. The majority of native speakers chose the plural verb 'have' when the antecedent of *none* was the plural 'rose bushes'.

H. Nouns Ending in –s or –ics:

According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983: 38), certain common and proper nouns ending in –s or –ics (e.g. *news, measles, politics, physics, billiards, mathematics, phonetics, mumps,* etc.) are singular and take a singular verbal.

16. Measles is / are sometimes serious.

Table (9): Native Speakers' Performance on Item (16).

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
16	O	[33%] + (27%) = 60%	[23%]	<17%>
	W	[27%]	[40%] + (33%) = 73%	0%

The above results indicate that native speakers' usage is divided over nouns ending in –s or -ics. In example (16), some followed the grammatical rule and opted for a plural verb because of the actual presence of the plural marker in the subject 'measles', but the majority treated it as a singular entity consistent with its meaning.

I. Existential Sentences:

According to Roberts (1962), in existential sentences (beginning with the nonreferential 'there'), the noun which follows the expression 'there' is treated as the subject and determines the form of the verb. However, according to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983: 287), in speech (as

opposed to writing) native speakers (even the educated), perceive nonreferential 'there' as a singular subject and overlook the logical subject for the purposes subject-verb agreement.

17. There is / 's / are two boys and one girl in my room.

18. There is / 's / are a girl and two boys in my room.

Table (10): Native Speakers' Performance on Items (17) and (18).

Item		Singular		Plural	All acceptable answers
		is	-'s		
17	O	0%	(16%)	[61%]+(23%) = 84%	0%
	W	0%	[7%] + (7%) = 14%	[46%]+(20%) = 66%	<20%>
18	O	0%	[17%]+(7%) = 24%	[38%]+(15%) = 53%	<23%>
	W	[16%]+ (7%)=23%	[23%]+(7%) = 30%	[20%]	<27%>

Contrary to what Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman claim, the results of my usage survey (as shown in Table 9 above) suggest that the majority of native speakers considered in their choice the number of the nearby noun in existential sentences like (17) and (18) above not only in speech but also in writing. Those few who perceived the expression 'there' as singular in speech did the same in writing.

J. Fractions and Percentages:

According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983: 38), fractions and percentages modifying mass nouns take the singular, and those modifying plural nouns take the plural. But those modifying collective nouns (as in the following examples) may take either the singular or the plural.

19. Seventy per cent of the population of Jerusalem is / are not Christian.

20. Sixty per cent of the population of Bethlehem is / are not Christians.

Table (11): Native Speakers' Performance on Items (19) and (20).

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
19	O	[45%] + (15%) = 60%	(15%)	<25%>
	W	[80%]	[7%]	<13%>
20	O	[7%]	[86%] + (7%) = 93%	0%
	W	[7%]	[93%]	0%

My significant conclusion here is that the form of the postverbal (NP2) in these sentences has an obvious impact on the native speakers' choice of the verb form. Most of the candidates chose the singular for the first sentence (where the postverbal is singular 'Christian'), but in the second instance (where the postverbal is plural 'Christians'), the majority chose the plural.

K. Plural Unit Words:

According to Christophersen (1969), plural unit words of distance, money, time, etc. as in sentences (21, 22) below, take the singular.

21. Five miles is / are a long way to walk.
22. The last five miles was / were the longest ones of our trip.

Table (12): Native Speakers' Performance on Items (21) and (22).

Item		Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
21	O	[70%]	[7%] + (16%) = 23%	<7%>
	W	[60%]	[23%]	<17%>
22	O	0%	[93%]	<7%>
	W	0%	[93%]+ (7%) = 100%	0%

According to what Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983: 41) claim, the subjects in the above two sentences are 'plural unit words of distance' and they require a plural verb. This analysis may be valid for sentence (21) depending on the obtained results in which the majority of the native speakers in our study chose a singular verb. However, the same results show the opposite to what Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman claim, in that nearly 100% of the sample in (22) above chose a plural verbal. In my view, these results could be explained in two ways. Firstly, native speakers might have notionally viewed the first subject as a generic or indefinite unit of distance, but the second subject as a specific or definite single miles within a collection. Secondly, as in Section J above, the result may be due to the influence of the following NP, in which the following NP in (21) above (i.e., a long way to walk) is singular but it is plural in (22) (i.e. the longest ones of our trip).

L. *Intervening Expressions:*

Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983: 42) reported that many grammars embrace the principle that a singular subject requires a singular verb form regardless of all plural forms in intervening prepositional phrases and other expressions such as *together with, along with, as well as, not others*, etc.

23. The mayor together with his advisors is / are preparing the report.

Table (13): Native Speakers' Performance on Item (23).

Item	Singular	Plural	All acceptable answers
O	[38%]	[23%] + (23%) = 46%	<16%>
W	[20%] + (13%) = 33%	[60%]	<7%>

The results obtained for example (23) show that native speakers do not follow the grammatical principle of non-intervention which Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman seem to endorse. But again, proximity may play a role here, and it would be useful to test it with a singular noun (e.g. advisor).

IV. Pedagogical Implications:

Within the context of teaching English as a foreign language in Palestine, as in many other places, some EFL teachers take pains dwelling on certain grammar rules without giving enough consideration to whether native speakers of English actually follow such rules in their daily talk. The results obtained from native speakers in this study concerning subject-verb concord should enhance a new awareness on the part of EFL teachers in Palestine and many other countries that they can feel more relaxed about grammar points that they present to their students. EFL teachers should avoid practices that rigidly deny EFL learners the freedom enjoyed by native speakers to adopt a more flexible attitude towards certain grammar points such as subject-verb concord where, as our data have shown, other types of concord (e.g. notional or proximity) are widely used. Let us suppose that an EFL teacher spends a great deal of time emphasising the concord rule that 'none' is a singular expression and it always takes a singular verbal. In my analysis, it would

be embarrassing for the teacher and confusing for the student if the latter comes across the word 'none' used with a plural verbal as in example 15 above. Clearly, it is unwise to divorce grammar 'rules' from real-life contexts and native speakers' usage. As Pilleux (in press) put it:

> "The most authentic way to teach grammar that involves so many exceptions is to get the students involved in authentic grammar discovery, as teaching only rules from a textbook does not cover the bases".

Perhaps it is even more appropriate to shift our emphasis, following Larsen-Freeman (2003), from grammar as rigid rules to grammar as "a dynamic process".

But it should be emphasised that this study is not a call for ignoring teaching grammar. Undoubtedly, non-native learners need to understand the systematic essence of language, but they deserve reasonable exposure to what native speakers actually say. Perhaps EFL teachers and students should be trained together on how to approach this issue.

V. Conclusion:

As my survey has shown, although native speakers appear to be more flexible with regard to number concord in their speech as compared with their writing, the general trend of our data shows that several uses of concord in the verb can mostly be attributed to the influence of semantic content. Thus, if ‘modern standard English’ embraces the traditional rule that the verb must agree with its grammatical subject in number, then the majority of native speakers practically use ‘non-standard’ or ‘ungrammatical’ concord. It must be admitted that such ‘violations’ of formal grammatical rules do not distort the connotation of the message. However, the question is now whether or not the ‘notional’ factor is in the course of being integrated into standard grammar, given that modern linguists have the freedom to modify their rules in response to native speakers' intuitions (Haegeman, 1994: 8). In fact, the proximity concord (i.e. the predicate agrees in number, not with the grammatical subject but with the last preceding nominal) has already become a rule despite some grammarians’ dissatisfaction with it in the past.

Some people may view the discrepancies between the practical use of language and the prescriptive rules as a source of constant creativity and flexibility in that language; some may consider them as a challenge to linguistic theories or an explicit weakness in the language itself; others may relate them to the speakers' disobedience of the rules. And here, I shall pose my last question which is: should the speakers of any language consistently follow what grammarians say or should grammarians just sort out and systematise what those speakers actually do? Subject-verb agreement has proved to be an area where it is difficult to draw the line between standard and non-standard usage, and between prescriptive and descriptive grammar. But no matter what, the findings of this study have pedagogical consequences for the EFL teaching-cum-learning process. Clearly, teachers should have awareness of not only what grammarians say but also of what native speakers actually say in their daily talk.

Acknowledgements:

I am immensely grateful to Professor Geoffrey Leech of the University of Lancaster for his invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also extend my deepest thanks to three anonymous reviewers for An-Najah University Journal for their helpful remarks and insightful suggestions. My special thanks are also due to all British undergraduate students at the University of Reading who willingly volunteered to participate as informants in this study.

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Appendix (1)

Dear student,

Whilst carrying out mini research into subject–verb agreement, I encountered some insurmountable difficulties. I therefore decided to carry out a survey of native speakers' opinion about the grammaticality of several sentences. I would be grateful if you could spare five minutes to advise me about the grammaticality of the following utterances.

Don't worry about any rules you may have learnt about what 'proper' or 'correct' English is. Work as quickly as you can – what we are interested in is your immediate reaction.

Thanks for your co-operation

Please try to judge which of the verb forms you [prefer/ accept/ reject] in the following sentences. Tick the appropriate box in the attached table.

1. *Crime and Punishment* [(a) is / (b) are] perhaps the best-constructed of Dostoyevsky's novels.
2. Bread and water [(a) has / (b) have] traditionally been considered the standard meal in prison.
3. The audience [(a) was / (b) were] enormous.
4. The audience [(a) was / (b) were] enjoying every minute of it.
5. What I say and what I think [(a) is / (b) are] my own affair.
6. What they want [(a) is / (b) are] revolutions everywhere.
7. I went to the market to buy vegetables, but what I found [(a) was / (b) were] stale.
8. Either my friends or my brother [(a) is / (b) are] going to do it.
9. Either my sister or my brothers [(a) is / (b) are] going to do it.
10. No one except his own supporters [(a) agrees / (b) agree] with him.
11. None of the pens [(a) is / (b) are] on the table.
12. Neither John nor the twins [(a) was / (b) were] at the party.
13. Neither the twins nor John [(a) was / (b) were] at the party.
14. Neither of these cars [(a) is / (b) are] exactly what I want.
15. I have ordered the rose bushes, but none [(a) has / (b) have] yet arrived.
16. Measles [(a) is / (b) are] sometimes serious.
17. There [(a) is / (b)'s / (c) are] two boys and one girl in my room.
18. There [(a) is / (b)'s / (c) are] a girl and two boys in my room.
19. Seventy per cent of the population of Jerusalem [(a) is / (b) are] not Christian.
20. Sixty per cent of the population of Bethlehem [(a) is / (b) are] not Christians.
21. Five miles [(a) is / (b) are] a long way to walk.
22. The last five miles [(a) was / (b) were] the longest ones of our trip.
23. The mayor together with his advisors [(a) is / (b) are] preparing the report.

ANSWER SHEET

Native: [………………..]   Mother-tongue: […………..]
Non-Native: […………..]   Department: [……….………]
(Please put a tick in the suitable box)

Question	Options	The only possible answer	The preferred if both possible	All acceptable answers
1	a			
	b			
2	a			
	b			
3	a			
	b			
4	a			
	b			
5	a			
	b			
6	a			
	b			
7	a			
	b			
8	a			
	b			
9	a			
	b			
10	a			
	b			
11	a			
	b			
12	a			
	b			
13	a			
	b			
14	a			
	b			
15	a			
	b			
16	a			
	b			
	c			
17	a			
	b			
	c			

	b			
19	a			
	b			
20	a			
	b			
21	a			
	b			
22	a			
	b			
23	a			
	b			

Appendix (2)

Native Speakers' performance on the spoken and written utterances.

Item No.	**Oral**					**Written**				
	[S]	**(S)**	**[P]**	**(P)**	**<A>**	**[S]**	**(S)**	**[P]**	**(P)**	**<A>**
1	63%	7%	0	7%	23%	100%	0	0	0	0
2	31%	0	17%	7%	46%	60%	0	0	7%	33%
3	86%	7%	7%	0	0	80%	0	0	13%	7%
4	10%	0	45%	15%	30%	23%	0	43%	7%	27%
5	30%	15%	25%	15%	15%	53%	0	27%	0	20%
6	7%	0	46%	7%	40%	7%	7%	46%	20%	20%
7	23%	0	27%	27%	23%	27%	0	53%	7%	13%
8	17%	0	69%	14%	0	20%	0	55%	0	25%
9	0	0	100%	0	0	7%	0	70%	0	23%
10	7%	0	46%	23%	23%	0	0	69%	31%	0
11	0	7%	76%	17%	0	14%	0	86%	0	0
12	0	0	69%	14%	17%	14%	0	73%	13%	0
13	0	0	46%	30%	24%	27%	0	46%	27%	0
14	0	0	53%	17%	30%	27%	0	60%	13%	0
15	0	0	84%	16%	0	27%	0	73%	0	0
16	33%	27%	23%	0	17%	27%	0	40%	33%	0
17	0	16%	61%	23%	0	7%	7%	46%	20%	20%
18	17%	7%	38%	15%	23%	39%	14%	20%	0	27%
19	45%	15%	0	15%	25%	80%	0	7%	0	13%
20	7%	0	86%	7%	0	7%	0	93%	0	0
21	70%	0	7%	16%	7%	60%	0	23%	0	17%
22	0	0	93%	0	7%	0	0	93%	7%	0
23	38%	0%	23%	23%	16%	20%	13%	60%	0	7%

[ ] = The only possible answer ( ) = The preferred answer.

< > = All acceptable answers S = Singular P = Plural

*The percentages indicate the proportion of native speakers that chose each verb form.